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Nature, Music, and Meaning in Debussy's Writings

PETER DAYAN

I should say at the outset that this is an article, not on Debussy's music, but on his words. I am not a musicologist; my experience, expertise, and ambitions lie in the field of textual analysis, particularly within the French post-Romantic tradition. Nonetheless, I hope that what I have to say may be of interest to musicologists. I am encouraged in this hope by Matthew Riley's highly suggestive article "Rustling Reeds and Lofty Pines: Elgar and the Music of Nature." Riley proceeds from the assumption that "Elgar's remarks can be read not merely as biographical testimony but also as literary tropes that have antecedents and contemporaneous parallels."¹ I started from the same assumption about Debussy's writings and found them particularly interesting in the way that they fold literary tropes into discourse on music.

The "antecedents and contemporaneous parallels" of Debussy's writing style compose a theoretical tradition within which the very definition of music depends on a paradoxical relationship with literature—and vice versa. This

relationship is present in Debussy's texts, often in a peculiarly elliptical or understated form, as if echoing the work of the poets he knew, in turns of phrase and types of reasoning that might well seem odd rather than revealing to a reader not used to analyzing the literary syntax of the time. My aim in writing this article was to see what would happen if I tried to read Debussy in the same way that I might read Mallarmé, or Baudelaire, or Proust, while wondering how such a reading might reflect on the way we associate words with music (which is, doubtless, the main enterprise of musicology). Whether these considerations can or should affect our appreciation of the music—that question, I do not, unlike Riley,² address directly. We will find that reasons emerge for deferring

²Or Elizabeth McCombie, whose book *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) is an examination of the parallels between Debussy's aesthetics and Mallarmé's based on an analysis, not of Debussy's words, but of his music, in terms informed by Mallarmé's critical discourse and poetic practice. McCombie provides perhaps the most productive model we have for listening to Debussy in ways structured by interdisciplinary reflection.

¹This journal 26 (2002), 155–77 (quote, p. 157).

any answer to it; but it does seem to me, going by his correspondence, that they affected Debussy's approach to composition, and indeed his ability to compose.

On 15 October 1905, Pierre Lalo published a review of Debussy's *La Mer* in which he criticized the work for not representing its subject realistically, immediately, or naturally enough.

It seemed to me that Debussy had willed himself to feel, rather than feeling truly, deeply, naturally. For the first time when listening to a picturesque work by Debussy, I had the impression of being, not before nature, but before a reproduction of nature; a marvellously refined, ingenious, and efficiently fabricated reproduction, but a reproduction nonetheless. . . . I could not hear the sea, see the sea, smell the sea.

(Il me semble que Debussy a voulu sentir plutôt qu'il n'a vraiment, profondément et naturellement senti. Pour la première fois, en écoutant une œuvre pittoresque de Debussy, j'ai l'impression d'être, non point devant la nature, mais devant une reproduction de la nature; reproduction merveilleusement raffinée, ingénieuse et industrielle, mais reproduction tout de même. . . . Je n'entends pas, je ne vois pas, je ne sens pas la mer.)³

Debussy replied ten days later (the delay is perhaps not without significance), with, as Nigel Simeone puts it, "wounded vigour."⁴ The question that interests me is: what wounded him? What, exactly, does he object to in Lalo's comments, and so strongly that, he implies, he would never have communicated with Lalo again had Lalo not shown more understanding

³Lalo's text is quoted in a footnote to Debussy's *Correspondance 1884–1918*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Hermann, 1993), p. 207. All references to Debussy's writings are either to this edition or to *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), henceforth abbreviated *Correspondance* and *Monsieur Croche*. The texts in these volumes may generally be found translated into English, either in *Debussy Letters*, ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Nichols (London: Faber, 1987), or in *Debussy on Music*, coll. and intro. Lesure, and ed. and trans. Richard Langham Smith (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977); my notes allow quoted texts to be located in these editions by their date, but the translations given here are mine.

⁴Nigel Simeone, "Debussy and Expression," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 108. Simeone gives the date of the review by Lalo as 16 February; this must be a mistake.

when writing earlier about *Pelléas et Mélisande*? Simeone suggests that it is "the charge of studio-bound artificiality which [Debussy] had so strenuously sought to avoid."⁵ This would, I think, be the natural assumption of the modern concertgoer, who would expect Debussy to want his work to be perceived as containing a natural expression of the sea. If one reads the letter carefully, however, one begins to conceive that exactly the opposite may be true. Debussy is not concerned to defend his music on the grounds that it really does render present the sea. On the contrary: his aim is to refuse Lalo the right to judge music, any music, on such grounds. In fact, his starting point, in his letter, is not to defend *La Mer* against Lalo's criticism; it is to defend his other works against Lalo's praise.

Lalo had appeared to say that some pieces by Debussy were admirable because, unlike *La Mer*, they did give him the impression of being immediately in front of nature herself. Debussy indignantly refuses this as a criterion for appreciating his work. He says at the very beginning of the letter that he doesn't mind Lalo not liking *La Mer*. But he very definitely does mind Lalo appreciating his earlier works on false grounds:

My dear friend,

The fact that you do not like *La Mer* causes me no difficulties and I have no intention of complaining about that . . . but I part company with you when you use this as a pretext for suddenly deciding that my other works are lacking in logic and are only held together by an obstinate attachment to feelings and an equally obstinate searching after the "picturesque" . . . Truly! dear friend, though I may not have learnt music as you understand it, nonetheless I am an artist.

(Mon cher ami,

Il n'y a aucun inconvénient à ce que vous n'aimiez pas *La Mer* et je ne veux pas m'en plaindre . . . mais je ne puis vous suivre quand vous en prenez prétexte pour trouver tout à coup, que mes autres œuvres manquent de logique et ne se soutiennent que par une sensibilité tenace et une recherche obstinée de "pittoresque." . . . Vraiment! cher ami, si je ne sais

⁵Ibid.

pas la musique comme vous l'entendez, je suis tout de même un artiste.⁶

There are plainly some unspoken assumptions filling a gap between Lalo's article and Debussy's letter. As we will see, these assumptions are constants in Debussy's thought. They are also constantly unspoken as well as, I think, generally missed, and it is well worth teasing them out.

What Lalo actually said was, first, that more than one of Debussy's earlier works seemed to him "pittoresque," and, second, that these works gave him a sense of being "before nature." This plainly seems desirable to Lalo. Debussy, however, thinks that to attribute these qualities to his works is to say that they are "lacking in logic," that they "are only held together by an obstinate attachment to feelings," and that their author is not an artist. What explains this apparently bizarre interpretation? It is Debussy's rejection of Lalo's notion that one should feel before the work of art that one is before nature. That, to Debussy, is mere "sensibilité," that is, an openness to emotion caused immediately by identifiable external stimuli, and he rejects it as contrary to the very essence of music. For Debussy, the logic of art, which every artist seeks by definition, is something whose connection to nature—if it has one—must always remain invisible, mysterious, intangible.

Debussy never sought to deny that listeners and composers alike are endlessly susceptible to seeing expressive connections between music and the world outside music. However, he firmly rejected the notion that such connections had anything to do with the value of the music. He believed equally firmly that true music was incapable of transmitting them; nor should it aim to.⁷ Thus, on more than one

occasion, he notes that certain passages in his compositions evoke, to him, specific scenes that the listener would never know about or guess at, but that this apparent failure of communication is of no importance from the strictly musical point of view. For example, in *Iberia*:

there is a man selling water-melons and a group of boys whistling; I see them quite clearly. . . . And yet, you see how easy it is to deceive oneself, since some people think that passage is a serenade. Anyway, the matter is of no importance at all, no more than an article by Lalo.

(il y a un marchand de pastèques et des gamins qui sifflent, que je vois très nettement. . . . Et pourtant regardez comme on peut se tromper, puisqu'il y a des gens qui ont pris cela pour une sérénade. Ça n'a d'ailleurs aucune importance, pas plus qu'un article de Lalo).⁸

One could go further. Not only is the transmission of such visions of no importance: the kind of music that is indeed able to portray specific scenes is unworthy of the name of music. Popular it may be; music it is not, and Debussy is more than happy to leave that sort of musical imitation to despised figures like Charpentier, author of the popular opera *Louise*:

Please believe that the music of "Fêtes" was as always shaped by impressions that were already distant, of festivities in the bois de Boulogne; the "imaginary procession" was on that particular day composed of cuirassiers! . . . You won't hold it against me that since that day, the trumpets have become veiled, and Liane de Pougy has ceased to be recognizable.—Let's leave fanfares to the barracks and Liane de Pougy to the immortal author of *Louise*.

(Croyez que la musique de "Fêtes" fut comme toujours adaptée à des impressions déjà lointaines d'une fête au bois de Boulogne; le "cortège chimérique" était, ce jour là, formé de cuirassiers! . . . Vous ne m'en voudrez pas si, depuis, les trompettes se sont voilées et que l'on ne reconnaît plus Liane de Pougy.—Laissons les sonneries aux casernes et Liane de Pougy à l'immortel auteur de *Louise*).⁹

⁶*Correspondance*, p. 207 (25 Oct. 1905).

⁷I seek here only to elucidate Debussy's beliefs on this matter; but their broader context is certainly fascinating. Lawrence Kramer's *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) contains a sustained and often brilliant reflection on the subject of how meanings become attached to music, based primarily on examples from a historical period in which Debussy is central; however, Debussy is not one of the composers on whom Kramer's book concentrates. Perhaps this article could be seen as a modest speculation within that gap.

⁸*Correspondance*, p. 264 (25 Feb. 1910).

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 161 (11 Feb. 1901).

Debussy is perfectly willing to admit (here to Dukas) that specific impressions are associated, for him personally, with particular works. But these impressions are "already distant" even for him, and they are impossible for the listener to recognize. This impossibility is expressed, in his description of the appearance of the finished work, by the metaphor of the veil, common in his writing (and in Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic theory generally), and by the affirmation that the individual figures in Debussy's impression cannot be read into the music itself. Charpentier can represent the well-known courtesan Liane de Pougy because he is not a musician; Debussy cannot represent her because he *is* a musician.

Before coming back to this anonymizing effect of music, let us return to the letter to Lalo about *La Mer*.

I love the sea; I have listened to it with the impassioned respect that is its due. If I have transcribed badly what it dictated to me, that is no concern either of yours or of mine. And it is not true that all ears perceive things in the same way; you must at least accept that.

(J'aime la mer, je l'ai écoutée avec le respect passionné qu'on lui doit. Si j'ai mal transcrit ce qu'elle m'a dicté, cela ne nous regarde pas plus l'un que l'autre. Et vous nous concéderez que toutes les oreilles ne perçoivent pas de la même façon.)¹⁰

I can't help suspecting that Lalo would have found these three sentences quite incoherent. The logic that links them is not apparent at first sight. But the principles set out above should help to explain that logic. Why should Debussy first assert that he has indeed listened to the sea, then affirm that it is irrelevant whether he has transcribed well or badly what it dictated to him? If he values (as he plainly does) what the sea has told him, shouldn't accurate and comprehensible transcription be considered a virtue?

But no: to Debussy, initial impressions are not to be denied; yet they have no fixed link to the work of music. If *La Mer* is to be judged as music, it cannot be judged as transcription; it

must not be seen as the incarnation of an impression. Listeners will not all hear the same scenes in the music (Debussy may hear whistling children where someone else hears a serenade), but that is of no relevance; it is the business of neither the critic nor the composer. Certainly, the impression was there, the sea gave Debussy his starting point, or at least what he, at the time, felt to be his starting point. But as he makes music, the sea must recede to the point where we cannot judge the music by the accuracy of its representation.

In other words, whereas Lalo was distinguishing between good musical representation (which would seem natural) and bad musical representation (which would seem like a secondary reproduction, a reproduction of a reproduction), to Debussy all musical representation, to put it simply, is bad; all musical representation has that secondary character Lalo attributes to *La Mer*, a secondary character that both Debussy and Lalo see as mechanical. In this sense, Debussy's theory of imitation clearly belongs to a tradition that stretches from Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam to Derrida. He distinguishes between straightforward reproduction, which is a technical matter of no interest to the artist, and the functioning of art, in which imitation and technique are necessary concepts but no more (and no less) necessary than an endless meditation on the obstructions and limits to imitation. He also subscribes, like Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Villiers, to the notion that the public unfortunately prefers mechanical reproduction to true art (which would be why he is less popular than Charpentier). Hence Debussy's reaction to the most famous instance of musical representation in an instrumental work, Beethoven's Sixth Symphony:

In short, the popularity of the *Pastoral Symphony* arises from the misunderstanding which more or less generally prevails between nature and man. Take the scene by the stream! . . . Oxen apparently come to drink from it (so the voice of the bassoons invites me to believe); not to mention the wooden nightingale and the Swiss cuckoo, which belong more to the art of M. de Vaucanson than to any nature worthy of the name . . . all this is pointlessly imitative, a purely arbitrary interpretation.

The old master has written pages which contain

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 207–08 (25 Oct. 1905).

far more profound expression of the beauty of the countryside, simply because they give us no direct imitation, but instead a transposition for the sentiments of what is "invisible" in nature.

(En somme, la popularité de la *Symphonie pastorale* est faite du malentendu qui existe assez généralement entre la nature et les hommes. Voyez la scène au bord du ruisseau! . . . Ruisseau où les bœufs viennent apparemment boire [la voix des bassons m'invite à le croire], sans parler du rossignol en bois et du coucou suisse, qui appartiennent plus à l'art de M. de Vaucanson qu'à une nature digne de ce nom . . . tout cela est inutilement imitatif ou d'une interprétation purement arbitraire.

Combien certaines pages du vieux maître contiennent d'expression plus profonde de la beauté d'un paysage, cela simplement parce qu'il n'y a plus d'imitation directe mais transposition sentimentale de ce qui est "invisible" dans la nature.)¹¹

The word "transposition" here signals a key concept of Mallarmé, explained notably (in typically elliptical style) in his essays "Averses ou Critique" and "Théodore de Banville."¹² Transposition is the movement that leads away from the world of facts (as recounted by journalists) toward an ideal medium in which the construction of sense is a game whose rules appear derived from the medium itself. In Mallarmé's case that medium is language; in Debussy's, music. Music, therefore, like poetry, tells no tales of real life:

We should be able to find something without turning into novelists or crime reporters. It is furthermore unnecessary for music to make you *think*! . . . All we need is for music to force people to *listen*, in spite of themselves . . . for them to find themselves

¹¹*Monsieur Croche*, p. 94 (16 Feb. 1903). Vaucanson was a celebrated eighteenth-century maker of automata, including an automatic flautist, and a particularly famous duck with a fully functioning digestive tract. Arthur B. Wenk, in *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), draws attention to the problem of representation in Debussy's music (as well, pp. 69–73, as to the question of Baudelairean correspondences, which I discuss below), but his grasp of Debussy's essential distinctions between imitation, translation, and transposition is so shaky that he can quote the last sentence of this passage affirming that it expresses Debussy's admiration of the Pastoral Symphony (p. 68), whereas in fact it expresses precisely the opposite.

¹²See Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2003), pp. 331 and 144.

incapable of formulating anything like an opinion . . . for them to think they have dreamed, for an instant, of an imaginary country, nowhere to be found because imaginary.

(Sans aller jusqu'au fait divers, ou au roman, on pourrait trouver quelque chose. Il est même inutile que la musique fasse *penser*! . . . Il suffirait que la musique force les gens à *écouter*, malgré eux . . . et qu'ils soient incapables de formuler n'importe quoi ressemblant à une opinion . . . qu'ils pensent avoir rêvé, un moment, d'un pays chimérique et par conséquent introuvable.)¹³

Music for Debussy should not enable us to formulate an opinion; it should not evoke in our minds any realistic tableau; it should merely make us think we have dreamed of a place that (unlike the sea) does not and cannot exist.

This notion was, as Lalo's attitude shows, neither generally understood nor uncontroversial in Debussy's time. It did, however, at least relate fraternally to a certain literary tradition that remained vigorous until the death of Mallarmé; a tradition that, in France, I think, lived on, through the inheritance of Mallarmé's ideas, one might say until the death of Derrida. Today, though, and especially in the English-speaking world, I see few echoes of it, few grounds for supposing that these values would be appreciated or deemed to be of much interest. They would doubtless be assimilated, with hindsight, to the generally discredited nineteenth-century philosophy of "absolute music." Daniel Chua's *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*¹⁴ provides a critique of the prehistory and development of this philosophy and shows clearly why its essentialism should appear to us so suspect, so close to mystification, and why we have come to focus again, not on the difficulty of associating meanings with music, but on how that association has been and may be established. But Chua's very rigor leads him to (or, perhaps, is rendered possible only by) a millenarian, indeed apocalyptic, conclusion that many will find as suspect as the philosophy he criticizes. It seems to me

¹³*Correspondance*, p. 162 (11 Feb. 1901).

¹⁴Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

that the proposition that music must have meaning is as much of a mystification as the proposition that music must not have meaning. We have learned, in practice, to occupy and make fertile the ground between those two propositions.¹⁵ In the long term, though, that fertile space can be maintained only if we retain our ability to identify with each of the propositions that bound it. This identification requires the courage to absorb a certain irony—the irony, precisely, of unavoidable mystification. In this study, I would like to respect Debussy's own courage. Therefore, I will not attempt a truly critical reading. Rather, I would like to explore how he thinks, and why, and where he leaves the relationship between music, letters, and nature. Certainly, I do not expect any stable conclusions. One of the ironies of this type of thinking is the instability of its results; so that, for example, Berlioz and Debussy, who shared so many principles, arrived, in many ways, at fundamentally opposed positions.

Debussy, as we have seen, did not accept the popular view that Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony was good music because it presented nature. Berlioz saw things differently. "But Beethoven's poem! . . . with its endless periods, so rich in colour! . . . its images, that speak to us! . . . its fragrances! . . . its light! . . . its eloquent silence! . . . its vast horizons! . . . its enchanted woodland solitudes!" (Mais le poème de Beethoven! . . . ces longues périodes si colorées! . . . ces images parlantes! . . . ces parfums! . . . cette lumière! . . . ce silence éloquent! . . . ces vastes horizons! . . . ces retraites enchantées dans les bois!)¹⁶ Berlioz positively appreciated, as Lalo might have done, the synaesthetic appeal of the work. He seems to take pleasure in describing it through reference to a broad range of extramusical experi-

ences: to sight and smell, certainly, but also to verbal language (evoked in the oxymoronic expressions "images parlantes" and "silence éloquent") and, right at the outset, to literature. To Berlioz, describing a work of music as a "poème" is obviously the highest praise. Not so to Debussy, for whom (in principle, though we will see below the limits of this principle) music should be perceived as nothing other than music. Hence his rejection of Berlioz's aesthetic and his suspicion that Berlioz's music is in a sense not real music, but a fraud or hoax. Berlioz, he says, "was, in my opinion, a prodigious hoaxster, who managed to believe in his own hoaxes" (fut, je crois, un prodigieux fumiste, qui arriva à croire lui-même à ses fumisteries).¹⁷

The ultimate "fumisterie" is the notion that music can tell a story. That task Debussy assigns, not merely to verbal language, but specifically to journalism, in other words to the least artistic type of language use according to Mallarmé's classification: "Some people would have music serve to recount base anecdotes! when newspapers are perfectly adequate to perform this task" (L'on voudrait qu'elle [la musique] serve à raconter de basses anecdotes! quand les journaux s'acquittent à merveille de ce soin.)¹⁸

Plainly, in implying that some composers try to fool us into thinking that music can tell stories, Debussy has program music in mind. His lifelong condemnation of program music is consistent with the principles behind these remarks. Music should not present a story; music should not attempt to do what language does; it should be itself. Individuals, be they composers, performers, or listeners, may form associations in their heads with extramusical elements, natural or literary. Nonetheless, a certain mystery, a veil, must always remain between any such associations and the music itself, in which they are never present. In reaction to Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung*, Debussy writes:

In any case, if people are going to start trying to understand what happens in a symphonic poem, then

¹⁵Among the critics who have tilled this ground, Lawrence Kramer stands out by virtue of his careful attention to the necessity of maintaining both propositions, and navigating between them. To give just one brief example (from a discussion of song in Schubert and George Eliot): "Meaning . . . remains the very nucleus of song. But any understanding of song does need to take account of how and why meaning is so regularly cast off" (*Musical Meaning*, p. 66).

¹⁶*A travers chants* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1862), p. 39.

¹⁷*Correspondance*, p. 72 (letter to André Poniatowski, Feb. 1893).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

we ought to give up writing them.—Reading those little guides, in which the letters of the alphabet represent clauses to be assembled into a sentence which is itself a rebus that one tries to solve during the performance, will certainly not put an end to the frequent misunderstandings between author and listener. . . . There is no need for programs, which attract literature “as to a honey-pot”; music, just music, bare music, is enough.

(D’ailleurs, si l’on se mêle de vouloir comprendre ce qui se passe dans un poème symphonique, il vaut mieux renoncer à en écrire.—Ce n’est certes pas la lecture de ces petits guides, où les lettres de l’alphabet représentent des membres de phrases-rébus, que l’on essaie de résoudre pendant l’exécution, qui fera cesser les fréquents malentendus entre l’auteur et l’auditeur . . . il n’est pas besoin de programme, qui attire la littérature “comme miel,” la musique la plus simple, la plus nue, y suffit.)¹⁹

Fifteen years earlier, at the time of his first sallies into the field of the symphonic poem, he had expressed a similar opinion, referring to his own work *Printemps*: “In all this, naturally, no program, as I have a profound disdain for music that has to follow a little piece of literature which, as one enters, one finds kindly thrust into one’s hand.” (Tout cela naturellement sans programme, ayant un profond dédain pour la musique devant suivre un petit morceau de littérature qu’on a eu le soin de vous remettre en entrant.) Or, writing to fellow composer Raymond Bonheur: “All I want is the assent of people who, like you, have no human interest in simplistic programs and are good enough to believe in music unalloyed.” (Je veux simplement l’assentiment de gens qui, comme toi, sont humainement désintéressés des programmes trop faciles et veulent bien croire à une musique sans alliage.)²⁰

But where, precisely, is this music “sans alliage”? In practice, its existence is hard to maintain. As we have seen, composers and listeners alike, even if their heart is in the right place, even if they “veulent bien croire” in music unalloyed, seem unable to resist the attribution of meaning; almost as soon as they

hear a specific piece of music, it conjures up extramusical connotations.²¹ The need to figure an escape from this dynamic, to identify a musicality that does not produce this effect, leads Debussy, paradoxically, back to Nature. The same twist, the same return to Nature, is to be found in Mallarmé, and for analogous reasons.

In a letter of 1911 to Roger Godet, one of the privileged friends to whom Debussy seems to have felt able to expose his thoughts just as they occurred to him, we find a progression of ideas that sums up beautifully this aesthetic logic. He begins from a planned future performance of his opera in Geneva; he fears that it will not succeed due to its lack of “emotional program.” We recognize here his conviction that popularity requires a program, whereas his music has none. (It may seem curious that he should consider his opera to have no such program; it is beyond my powers to analyze the opera itself to explain this, but I hope that Debussy’s contention is now at least comprehensible as part of an aesthetic system.) He goes on to speculate about the Geneva public: he imagines it as unmusical because it is composed of professors who only recognize ideas when they are formally dressed up. Music, as we have seen, according to Debussy, should contain no such ideas. Then he says he would infinitely prefer listening to the wind on the mountains with Godet.

Prefer this to what? Listening to *Pelléas* in Geneva? It is not quite clear; what *is* clear is that he immediately proceeds to describe the wind as creating music. But this would be a music that, obviously, since it has been created by no human agency, cannot be received as the transmission of any human sense at all. Can music be said to exist in the absence of perceived human meaning? Yes and no. It makes no sense to define it thus, and yet Debussy’s

¹⁹*Monsieur Croche*, p. 215 (S. I. M., Dec. 1912).

²⁰*Correspondance*, p. 49 (9 Feb. 1887), and p. 61 (5 Oct. 1890).

²¹Proust shares this perception. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, to attribute meaning to music is to betray it, yet no one can long resist the temptation to do so. For an examination of how this dynamic emerges in the work, see my “On the Meaning of ‘Musical’ in Proust,” in *Word and Music Studies: Essays in Honor of Stephen Paul Scher and on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage*, ed. Suzanne M. Lodato, Suzanne Aspdén, and Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 143–58.

aesthetic logic, like Mallarmé's, inexorably pushes us toward a point of view from which the appearance of beauty is dependent on the erasure of meaning, so that the most beautiful of sentences is the one that says nothing:

I am a little fearful for *Pelléas* in Geneva. It doesn't have at all the manners one needs to please people there, or to be pleased to be there. . . . Its emotion without program, without leitmotif, will appear indecent! Of course I may be wrong, but I have a suspicion that Geneva is populated by professors, and ideas are only admitted in white tie.

Now what I would find infinitely more tempting would be to go with you and listen to the wind on the mountains! . . . You can be sure that it will sing only an unnumbered music composed of all the harmonies it picks up as it passes over the tops of the trees (this sentence is all the more beautiful because it is determined to mean nothing!).

(Je crains un peu Genève pour *Pelléas*. Il n'a pas du tout les manières qu'il faut pour y plaire et même pour s'y plaire . . . Son émotion sans programme, sans leit-motiv, sera prise pour de l'indécence! Maintenant je me trompe peut-être, mais tout de même il me semble que Genève est un nid à professeurs où les idées ne sont admises qu'en cravate blanche.

Par exemple, ce qui me tente infiniment plus c'est d'aller écouter le vent sur la montagne avec vous . . . ! Soyez assuré qu'il ne chantera que cette musique innombrable faite de toutes les harmonies qu'il recueille en passant sur la cime des arbres [cette phrase est d'autant plus belle qu'elle ne veut résolument rien dire!].²²

Nothing, "rien"; "ne rien vouloir dire," to mean or to say nothing, to want to say nothing; the degree of beauty depending on the degree to which one says nothing; these notions go back at least to Flaubert's intuition, more than fifty years earlier, that the highest literary ambition would be to write a book about nothing, a "livre sur rien." And when, in *La Musique et les Lettres*, Mallarmé, with mock reluctance, consents to an "impious taking to pieces" (démontage impie) of the mechanism of literature, its mainspring turns out to be nothing, "rien." Literature is about nothing, it presents

nothing and contains no formal white-tied thoughts ("That's just the point, I have no thoughts, ever" [Justement je ne pense rien, jamais]).²³ From this remark, it becomes plain why the poets of the period sought in literature itself "music before all else" (De la musique avant toute chose).²⁴ For Mallarmé as for Debussy, the least artistic of discourses is that of the newspaper or the realist novel, which claims to represent the truth. Literature, which is formed from verbal language, the matter of that unartistic discourse, is thus, in its refusal of content, permanently in reaction against its own substance. The same could be said of the other arts that were, at the time, perceived to operate within a representational language: painting and sculpture. Music, on the other hand, has the privilege of not initially appearing to represent; and this condition endlessly attracted the other arts.

Nonetheless, while music itself remains of right invulnerable to the ills of representation, the musician must be constantly on guard against those who, like Charpentier, Lalo, or Berlioz, would seek to pervert our view by reducing music to the imitation of this or that work of literature or natural phenomenon. The most radical defense against that perversion is expressed in the adverb "infiniment" in Debussy's letter. An infinite temptation cannot lead us to any piece of music in particular, just as it cannot lead to any meaning or any sense. It can only take us toward that which lies beyond specific sense, beyond specific works. But what is beyond specific works is beyond any conceivable human music. Thus Debussy reaches, like Mallarmé and Flaubert before him, that forbidding aesthetic summit, that wind-blown mountain-top, from which it seems that the logic of artistic endeavor summons us to renounce all that is human in the work of art: so literature kills literature, and music kills music. It would be at least a theoretically rewarding endeavor to analyze Debussy's repeated lamentations on his sterility as a composer with these ideas in mind, and

²³Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II, 67, 258.

²⁴These are the opening words of Verlaine's famous "Art poétique"; see Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962), p. 326.

²²*Correspondance*, p. 298.

to compare them to the similar lamentations of his literary forebears.

But I imagine that anyone who, having read Debussy's letters and critical writings, has followed my argument to this point, will be uncomfortable. I have maintained that for Debussy music cannot present or represent nature and should not attempt to do so, and that to perceive music in nature is to occupy a position from which music becomes inhuman, and therefore humanly impossible to write. Yet, as many critics have pointed out, Debussy also frequently seems to regard nature as a model for music, to posit a special relationship between music and nature. I intend now to examine the dynamics of that special relationship. We will see that, despite appearances, if one reads carefully enough the sentences in which Debussy sets them out, they do not contradict my argument so far. However, they do force us to perform some peculiar theoretical acrobatics, in which the relationship between nature and music comes to interact in disconcerting ways with the relationship between music and poetry.

Nowhere are these themes more clearly presented and more tightly intertwined than in an article of 1915 that, at first reading, one might take as an exhortation to composers to present nature in music, the sort of thing that might gladden the heart of Lalo. It concludes, indeed, with a condemnation of Berlioz's music strangely similar to Lalo's condemnation of *La Mer* as a secondary reproduction:

Our symphonic painters really do not give sufficiently fervent attention to the beauty of the seasons. . . . And yet, music is precisely the art which is closest to nature, the art which lays for her the most subtle trap. Despite their claims to be acting as official translators, painters and sculptors can only give a more or less free and always fragmentary interpretation of the beauty of the universe. They only seize and note down one of its aspects, one of its moments; only musicians have the privilege of capturing all the poetry of night and day, of earth and sky, the privilege of reconstituting its atmosphere and giving the rhythm of its immense palpitation. We are aware that they do not exercise this privilege too often . . . usually, their passion satisfies itself with vegetation that literature has dried between the leaves of its books. Berlioz asked for nothing more, all his life. His genius took an astringent delight in wandering nostalgically around a store of artificial flowers.

(Au fond, nos peintres symphonistes n'accordent pas une attention assez fervente à la beauté des saisons. . . . Or, la musique est précisément l'art qui est le plus près de la nature, celui qui lui tend le piège le plus subtil. Malgré leurs prétentions de traducteurs-assermentés, les peintres et les sculpteurs ne peuvent nous donner de la beauté de l'univers qu'une interprétation assez libre et toujours fragmentaire. Ils ne saisissent et ne fixent qu'un seul de ses aspects, un seul de ses instants: seuls, les musiciens ont le privilège de capter toute la poésie de la nuit et du jour, de la terre et du ciel, d'en reconstituer l'atmosphère et d'en rythmer l'immense palpitation. Nous savons que c'est un privilège dont ils n'abusent pas . . . le plus souvent leur passion s'accommode d'une végétation que la littérature a desséchée entre les feuillets de ses livres: Berlioz s'en contenta toute sa vie. Son génie trouva d'après délices à promener sa nostalgie dans un magasin de fleurs artificielles.)²⁵

It would certainly be possible, taking this passage in isolation, to read it as revealing a sort of Romantic faith in nature as the repository of the truth that art seeks to reveal. After all, it seems to imply that the task of the artist is to give us "la beauté de l'univers." But a more careful reading reveals that at every turn, using a technique strikingly similar to Proust's, Debussy interposes an operation between music and nature. Music never renders nature present; between nature and music there is always work to be done, a work of transposition that denies the possibility of calculating an equivalence between the music itself and that which may exist outside it.

Debussy begins by giving his opinion that "nos peintres symphonistes" do not give "une attention assez fervente" to the seasons. Let us recall his reaction to Lalo's strictures on *La Mer*. "I love the sea," he said; "I have listened to it with the impassioned respect that is its due." In neither text is there any suggestion that the musician should imitate or represent nature; what Debussy seems to value is a passionate personal reaction to nature. But what is the relationship between that passion and art? That remains unclear. Debussy's next move, here as in the letter to Lalo, is not to explain it, but to figure the problematic point of contact

²⁵*Monsieur Croche*, pp. 239–40 (S. I. M., 1 Nov. 1913).

between music and nature. "Music is precisely the art which is closest to nature, the art which lays for her the most subtle trap." Why is music closer to nature than the other arts? Because, as we have seen, music's advantage over the other arts consists in its distance from meaning; it does not represent, and neither does nature. Music thus resembles nature far more than do poetry or painting, which are immediately perceived as representing something outside themselves. For that very reason, nature cannot appear to be present, to be contained within music as it can appear to be contained in the other arts. Hence Debussy's careful formula: music lays a trap for nature more subtle than theirs.

We may fear that music's subtle trap might need to be a large one. For whereas the other arts may, unsubtly, ensnare this or that facet of nature, portray one of her faces, music, it would seem, aims to capture her entire. I hope that my preceding argument will have made it clear why this should be: the infinite temptation, dangerous though it is, is alone worthy of the true artist; the particular can safely be left to journalists. But I have also suggested that, though music and nature may have a certain endlessness in common, there is no presence in nature that can simply pass into or be represented by music. Does Debussy here contradict this suggestion by implying that the musician captures nature in his trap? No. On the contrary: he continually, subtly, interposes between music and nature a third term that allows each to escape the other's snare. Debussy says that music lays a trap; he never says that nature falls into it.

In a maneuver that perfectly mirrors the way poets present their art as music, Debussy writes, not of a direct relation between music and nature, but of a relation between music and *the poetry of nature*: "Only musicians have the privilege of capturing all the poetry of night and day, of earth and sky." Before nature reaches music, it must first transit through poetry, through language, which is never wholeness but always already division, articulation (note that Debussy does not here utter the single word "nature" but breaks nature's image down into two pairs of opposites). This, in a sense, is bizarre. After all, Debussy has just been sug-

gesting that music, in its totalizing similarity to nature, is superior to poetry; so what on earth is poetry doing interposing itself between music and nature? I will return to that question, which is a central one, later; for now, I would venture to suggest that we keep in mind the reciprocity of this relationship. The poets Debussy knew wrote about the music, the harmony, the rhythm of nature, in the same way that Debussy, as musician, writes about the poetry of nature. What is constant is the need to present art, not as directly connected to nature, but as the imitation of another art that itself is inherent in nature.

But, one might ask, do we not here have that structure of secondary representation that Lalo saw in *La Mer* and Debussy in Berlioz? music as an imitation of an imitation? Almost—but not quite. The verb "capter" is another subtle trap. "Capter" is not to capture in the way one might capture a beast or a view; it is, rather, to tap or channel, as one might the water of a spring, or the interest of a listener. The implication is always that one diverts what is "capté" from the course it would naturally have followed. The following two infinitive verbs, "reconstituer" and "rythmer," indicate even more clearly that the activity of the composer is by no means a matter of faithful transcription, of containing nature whole so that, as Lalo might have liked, the listener feels placed in front of her. The activity is a process of recreation, not of simple reflection. And what is it in nature, exactly, that music does not imitate but re-creates? An atmosphere; an immense palpitation. These are qualities so vague, so general, so universal, that their effect is to remove any possibility of determining, of calculating, of theorizing the link between music and nature.

Furthermore, I have been guilty myself of a reductive reading that oversimplifies the link between music and nature. What is the antecedent of the pronoun "en" that precedes the verbs "rythmer" and "reconstituer"? Grammatically speaking, it must not, or at least may not, be "nature," but "poésie." Once again, Debussy subtly inserts veils between music and nature. What can traverse them? Are there any qualities that manage to survive the triple filter of nature, poetry, and music?

Only two, it would seem, to judge by this passage: first, endlessness, and then the articulation of time, which in nature is seen as palpitation and in music or poetry as rhythm. Articulation is, as Derrida shows, the beginning of all human meaning; but seen as such, it is precisely that which precedes meaning. What music does with or to nature gives no full sense to either. So in Debussy's account, although music is not an immediate presentation of nature, neither can it be a secondary representation; it represents no thing at all.

Literature, on the other hand, so Debussy has been telling us, can and does represent. It does not aim solely at endlessness; it presents fragments. The more pusillanimous musicians will imitate it. They will indeed tell stories, as poets do; and their works will be secondary representations, and therefore not, to Debussy, genuinely musical. Here we find again that opposition between the natural and the artificial that is a constant of Debussy's writing on the subject. The opposition is not, if I may be forgiven for laboring the point, between two kinds of imitation, one natural and the other artificial; it is between imitation, which is always artificial, always secondary, and true artistic activity, which functions as an imitation of nothing in particular—except perhaps of everything. Most composers ignore this; "their passion satisfies itself with vegetation that literature has dried between the leaves of its books. Berlioz asked for nothing more, all his life. His genius took an astringent delight in wandering nostalgically around a store of artificial flowers."

We have, then, in the passage I have been analyzing, two completely different types of reference to literature. In both, literature comes between music and nature. But at one point it represents an essential positive link in that relationship: syntactically speaking, it is only through "poésie" that music and nature reach each other; whereas at another point, literature is clearly a negative force, representing that temptation of the fragmentary the brave musician must overcome.

Plainly, we have here the structure of what Derrida calls the "supplement." Poetry is both necessary to music and the parasite that saps its strength; poetry is both the source of music's

life and an artificiality that threatens its vigor. In the analysis of such supplements, one of the main points of interest is always an investigation of the conditions that cause the supplement to appear under its positive rather than negative guise. In this case Debussy's use of poetry once again mirrors perfectly Mallarmé's use of music. For the positive poetry, according to Debussy, the poetry that should come between nature and music is the poetry that does not exist in the form of concrete works; it is poetry in general, poetry in the abstract. Poetry perceived as an artificial imitation, on the other hand, consists of specific books, those that Berlioz and other composers read, those that contain the artificial flowers that seduced them.

What, then, of Debussy's own use of specific literary works? And what of his reference to specific aspects of nature? Debussy did write songs, and he composed *Pelléas* and *Prélude à "L'Après-midi d'un faune"*: how could he distinguish between his own habits and those of Berlioz? and why should we not see these compositions as secondary representations? Is not Lalo's reaction to *La Mer*, so similar to Debussy's reaction to Berlioz, perfectly understandable given the title that Debussy himself had provided? Why, indeed, did Debussy give such titles to his works at all?

To this question, there seems to me to be quite a simple answer. It will seem odd to modern ears, but it would have seemed less so in the aesthetic tradition of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. It is this. Art represents nothing, but is always initially taken to represent something, by the artist and by the public. The highest art, however, will attempt to be honest by showing that this initial appearance of representation is a falsification—precisely the falsification of art. True art will therefore point to the fact that it is a fiction, that as it appears to represent, it lies. Debussy's titles form part of this strategy. They tap or channel our desire to see representation in the music, and, having caught us in this trap, they frustrate that same desire by their inadequacy, their limitation, so that we see through them to the music beyond. They tell us, not that music presents nature, but that music must be perceived in the space between nature and human creativity, the space where fiction is created. If music truthfully rep-

resented anything, its value could be calculated by the precision of that representation. Fortunately, it does not, and the value of the glorious lie that is art, according to Mallarmé, remains incalculable: "Art is the most beautiful of lies . . . we must desire that it should remain a lie; the alternative would be for it to become something useful, as dull as a factory." (L'art est le plus beau des mensonges . . . il faut désirer qu'il reste un mensonge, sous peine de devenir une chose utilitaire, triste comme une usine.) We can see now why this declaration is not in contradiction with the affirmation, in the same article, that the "laws of beauty" (lois de beauté) may be "inscribed in the totality of nature's movement" (inscrites dans le mouvement total de la nature).²⁶ The "mouvement total de la nature," nature as a totality articulated in time, does correspond to the laws of beauty; but it cannot be imitated or presented as a sense or meaning; it cannot be said. Whatever art appears to say can only correspond to fragments of nature, but that fragmentariness is denied by art's own nature. Art, therefore, does not really say what it appears to say; if it says anything, that thing is a lie.

This dual relationship between music and nature parallels the dual relationship between music and poetry. Just as there is a "good" poetry that is conceived as a totality, so there is a "good" nature, a totality of nature, with which music has something essential in common; and just as there is a "bad" poetry, literature as a collection of works lending themselves to imitation, so there is a "bad" nature, nature divided into scenes or meanings that can be reproduced.

These two faces of nature appear in a single sentence that Debussy writes about the composition of *Pelléas*. "I wanted for music a freedom which is in her more perhaps than in any art, since she is limited not to a more or less exact reproduction of nature, but to the mysterious correspondences between Nature and the Imagination." (Je voulais à la musique une liberté qu'elle contient peut-être plus que n'importe quel art, n'étant pas bornée à une

reproduction plus ou moins exacte de la nature, mais aux correspondances mystérieuses entre la Nature et l'Imagination.)²⁷ The two occurrences of the word "nature" in this sentence are distinguished by the capitalization of the second, which functions by correspondences, not by the dynamic of representation. These correspondences are mysterious (whereas reproduction is not mysterious, but exact) in the sense that their second term is in the imagination, not in reason; in the domain of fiction, not of utility. If one holds on to this distinction between reproduction and correspondence, the former leading to a utilitarian truth, the latter toward an imaginary one, many apparent contradictions in Debussy's aesthetic judgments may be resolved.

For example, in his presentation of naturalness or realism in opera, it might seem that Debussy justifies his own practice in *Pelléas* in terms perilously close to those he uses to condemn Italian verismo. But there is a difference: precisely the difference between correspondence and representation. Of *Pelléas*, he writes: "The characters in this drama attempt to sing like natural people, and not in an arbitrary language fabricated from outdated traditions." (Les personnages de ce drame tâchent de chanter comme des personnes naturelles et non pas dans une langue arbitraire faite de traditions surannées.)²⁸ Whereas he describes contemporary Italian opera thus:

The aesthetic principle of this art form is certainly false, because life is not to be translated by means of songs, but Verdi has something heroic in the way that he maintains a lie in the face of life which is perhaps closer to beauty than the attempted reality of the new Italian school. Puccini, Leoncavallo and their ilk aim at a study of character, or even a sort of brutal psychology, which in reality leads to nothing more than anecdotes.

(L'esthétique de cet art est certainement fautive, parce que l'on ne traduit pas la vie par des chansons, mais il y a chez Verdi une façon héroïque de mentir à la vie peut-être plus belle que l'essai de réalité tenté par la jeune école italienne. Puccini, Leoncavallo

²⁶*Monsieur Croche*, p. 67 (*Musica*, Oct. 1902), and pp. 66–67.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 61 (April 1902).

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 62.

prétendent à l'étude de caractère, voire même à une sorte de psychologie brutale qui n'aboutit, en réalité, qu'à de la simple anecdote.²⁹

I hope that, in the light of my argument so far, it will come as no surprise that Debussy praises art as a lie ("mentir à la vie"), and refuses anecdote ("en réalité"). But what, exactly, is the difference between "singing like natural people" (*chanter comme des personnes naturelles*), which is what Debussy wanted his characters to do, and "translating life by means of songs" (*traduire la vie par des chansons*), which is what the unmusical Italians do?

To begin with, note the contrast between the plural noun "*des chansons*" and the verb "*chanter*." "Bad" nature, as we have seen, is perceived as divided into scenes or fragments like an opera divided into arias; "good" nature, on the other hand, is a single "*mouvement total*." Whereas the characters in Italian operas produce set pieces, Debussy's characters are engaged in a process. Nor is that process one of reproduction. Italian opera, says Debussy, aims to translate life, but translation normally presupposes the existence of a preexistent text to be translated. It thus allows the calculation of an equivalence between source and target, precisely the calculation that, for Debussy, is the antithesis of art. (Recall that painters and sculptors are dismissed for perceiving their task as that of "*traducteurs-assermentés*."³⁰) Debussy's characters translate nothing, imitate nothing; indeed, it is not clear that they achieve anything concrete at all. They *attempt* to sing. Whether or not they succeed, whether or not Debussy wishes them to succeed, we cannot quite tell, but if they do, it is "like natural people" (*comme des personnes naturelles*).

The word "*comme*," which I have translated as "*like*," absent from the passage on Italian opera and central to the description of *Pelléas*, has long been recognized in French as the key to poetic language, because it introduces all kinds of imaginative comparisons. More particularly, it is the pivot of the theory, going back to Baudelaire, of art not as imitation, but

as incalculable correspondence. In Baudelaire's famous sonnet "*Correspondances*," the word occurs six times. It becomes ubiquitous, often surreptitiously and inconspicuously so, in Mallarmé as in Proust. What it signifies is a relationship of neither identity nor imitation, nor of any calculable translation, but one that depends on an imaginative perception. In his opera, as we have seen, Debussy wanted a music limited to the "*mysterious correspondences between Nature and the Imagination*"; precisely this correspondence is evoked here. What, after all, can it mean to "*chanter comme des personnes naturelles*"? What are "*personnes naturelles*"? If we take the phrase to mean people as we encounter them in everyday life, Debussy's sentence is an obvious nonsense. But if by "*naturelles*," we understand "*people who retain the character of Nature*," of what I have called "*good*" nature as opposed to the "*bad*" nature that is always already imitation, the position of this "*chanter*" becomes clear. Debussy's characters would like to be able to sing as if they were part of that "*mouvement total*" in which imagination finds a correspondence to nature—or perhaps to poetry; but always a correspondence, never a translation or an imitation.

This positioning of song explains many of Debussy's pronouncements on the setting of texts to music. Music, to him, cannot express, reflect, imitate, explain, or convey the sense of any individual text; music and text must relate, as must music and nature, through unifying imaginary correspondence alone. This relation Debussy describes in terms that present music and text, not as reflections of each other, but as parts of a single felt totality. He is uncomfortable with the traditional vocabulary that portrays a musician setting words to music; he is even less enamored of the Wagnerian model, of music as somehow structured by a text. He prefers to think of music and text as one body. Once they have come together in the work of art, any calculation of their relationship would destroy the sense of oneness that art requires, and that requires in turn the mystery of correspondence: "In the opinion of Mr Catulle Mendès . . . I have not rendered 'the poetic essence of the play,' and my music remains 'independent of that essence.' Yet I devoted all

²⁹*Monsieur Croche*, p. 96 (*Gil Blas*, 16 Feb. 1903).

³⁰See quotation from *Monsieur Croche*, pp. 239–40, above.

my sincerity and all my efforts to the attempt to identify the one with the other." (M. Catulle Mendès . . . estime que je n'ai pas rendu "l'essence poétique du drame," et que ma musique reste "indépendante de celle-ci." J'ai pourtant tâché de tous mes efforts et de toute ma sincérité d'identifier l'une à l'autre.)³¹

Just as he did not attempt to refute Lalo's criticism that *La Mer* did not render the sea present, because it was not the role of music to do so, so Debussy does not answer Mendès's charge that he has failed to "rendre l'essence poétique du drame," because the charge demonstrates only that Mendès doesn't know what music is. What Debussy had tried to do is not to render a preexistent essence, still less any preexistent text; he aimed not to render anything, but to operate an identification, to identify the music with the essence of the text, to make of both a single unit, a totality. Similarly, in *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien*: "I was applying my theories—if the expression may be allowed—on music for the stage . . . which must be closely wedded to the text, forming a single body." (J'ai mis à exécution mes théories—si je puis dire—sur la musique de scène . . . qui doit faire corps, étroitement, avec le texte.)³²

A clue to the genealogy of these theories, with their notion that music and text should be identified with each other rather than related by way of interpretation, imitation, or explanation, appears in a letter of 1885 in which Debussy explains why he cannot continue with an attempt to write an opera on a text written in classical French verse.

Zuleima is dead and you won't catch me trying to resurrect it, I never want to hear about it again, as it's not at all the kind of music I want to make, I want a kind of music so supple and so open to contrasts that it can mold itself to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the caprices of our daydreams.

(*Zuleima* est morte et ce n'est certes pas moi qui la ferai ressusciter, je ne veux plus en entendre parler, n'étant pas du tout du genre de musique que je veux faire, j'en veux une qui soit assez souple, assez heurtée

pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux caprices de la rêverie.)³³

The last twenty words of this passage, as J. Lesure points out in his note, quote the preface to Baudelaire's prose poems, in which Baudelaire describes why he is attempting to write poetry in prose rather than in verse (Debussy has substituted "musique" for Baudelaire's "prose poétique"). Like Debussy, Baudelaire desires a certain physical identification between text (musical, or prose-poetic) and pre-text (movements of the soul or daydreams).

But the context of this passage should also remind us of something Baudelaire and Mallarmé had in common, something they expressed in the prefaces to their single work of poetic prose: a sense of necessary failure. The new type of prose that Baudelaire describes, in the terms taken up by Debussy, is something, he says, that he dreamt of, just as Debussy here is saying not what he has done, but what he would like to do. Baudelaire states that he has in fact failed to realize his dream ("I was not able to come anywhere near my mysterious and brilliant model" [je restais bien loin de mon mystérieux et brillant modèle].³⁴) Baudelaire's model, *Gaspard de la Nuit* by Aloysius Bertrand, in turn presents itself as a failure, a doomed attempt to find Art; the effect is thus of a "mise en abyme" of failure. Mallarmé prefaces his *Divagations* with a note that begins: "A book such as I do not like, those deprived of architecture or unity. No man escapes decidedly, from journalism." (Un livre comme je ne les aime pas, ceux épars et privés d'architecture. Nul n'échappe décidément, au journalisme.)³⁵

The art of these writers defines itself as permanently attracted toward an unattainable unity; it remains fragmentary. Nonetheless, it must maintain the sense of that unity as an ideal term of art—a unity presented precisely by reference to art, to other art, which, seen at a certain distance or from a certain angle, seen

³¹Monsieur Croche, pp. 269–70 (*Le Figaro*, 16 May 1902).

³²Ibid., p. 305 (*Comoedia*, 18 May 1911).

³³*Correspondance*, pp. 38–39 (19 Oct. 1885).

³⁴See Baudelaire, *Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1967), p. 32.

³⁵Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, II, 82.

as different from what the poets themselves can do, has that character of oneness they cannot achieve. This is an inescapable dynamic of the post-Romantic aesthetic. The new work is never itself ideal, but it idealizes a vision of an art outside itself, an art whose completeness parallels an imagined completeness of nature. Although in the passages I have just cited it is architecture and *Gaspard de la Nuit* that play the part of idealized works, more often (and almost always in more fully developed arguments) it is music. And similarly, or rather conversely, Debussy, when considering his own work, describes it not as an ideal achievement, but in terms of what he has been trying to do. It is seen as an attempt rather than as a result or an end in itself; it exhibits an ambition, a desire; beyond it may be poetry, but poetry as an idealized unity, "toute la poésie" in parallel with an equally totalized, equally unrealized, equally absent nature.

The function of texts, of poetry, of programs, and of the verbal generally, therefore, in the context of Debussy's music, is not at all to provide a meaning to the music or an explanation of it. Beyond individual works, anecdotes, or scenes, poetry and nature conjoined serve as the horizon and vanishing point of music. We must look toward them—hence the words attached to Debussy's compositions; but we must never go through the music to reach them, for if we did, if we arrived at them, they would become fragmented into texts and Debussy would be reduced to the status of a "traducteur-assermenté."

Once we have accepted the full consequences of this, we can at last, I think, begin to overcome what has long been a blind spot in our understanding of the aesthetics of the period. The obstinate image of poetry as music has traditionally been explained by reference to Mallarmé's assertion that poetry was, in his time, trying to take back from music what belonged to literature, as if a certain essential quality of music existed and needed first to be extracted from audible concert-hall or opera-house music and then reimported into literature. But if one conceives the process thus, it becomes impossible to understand why poetry should occupy a place in Debussy's writing so similar to the place of music in Mallarmé's. In

fact, music does not contain an essence that the poem extracts; rather, it represents, for the poet, one of the two poles of an oscillation between meaning and non-meaning, between fragmentation and totality, which alone allows a space for art. Crudely put, from the poet's point of view, art is not meaning; therefore, it must be music. But music without meaning would be unarticulated; therefore it could not be written. What is needed is a dynamic that allows for the constant articulated vanishing of meaning. For that, both music and poetry are necessary, so that each can look toward the other and project thither that vanishing. In music, we need titles or programs³⁶—and a sense of our incapacity, of the futility and impertinence of the endeavor, when we try to analyze them, to calculate strictly their value. In poetry, we need music—and that same sense of incapacity, futility, and impertinence when we try to calculate the presence of that music.



³⁶Of course, we have not always needed them; these remarks apply only at a certain point in the aesthetic argument, articulated most forcefully, for me, by Mallarmé and Debussy. If I may allow myself one observation to do with music history, necessarily tentative and general: it seems to me that one of Debussy's innovations, very much analogous to the invention of the prose poem by Baudelaire, is to replace the inadequacy of formal analysis by inadequacy of reference. In an idealized past, composers including Rameau, Mozart, or Beethoven created works within a tradition that led one to expect certain things of the music's form. The artistic force, the horizon or vanishing point of this music, derives from the way in which it escapes from that form while confirming the form's necessity. (An analysis of Rameau's writing would, I suggest, allow one to demonstrate this process operating through his opposition between mathematics and taste.) In Debussy, to some extent, meaning, reference, or program replaces form in the unavoidable expectations it creates and in the way it exceeds those expectations. This creates difficulties in music analysis in the same way that prose poetry creates difficulties in literary analysis.

Abstract.

This article sets out to examine what Debussy wrote about music in the light of the discourse on music, literature, and nature that Debussy knew from contemporary literature. It becomes apparent that Debussy shares with, for example, Mallarmé a refusal to consider that his work renders natural scenes present. Indeed, he rejects entirely the notion that

music can or should represent anything (when it appears to represent, it is, precisely, not music). Debussy accordingly despises programs and critics who look in his music for images or ideas that they expect him to have put there.

Why, then, does he give his pieces programmatic titles? And how is one to understand the relationship between words and music, for example, in *Pelléas et Mélisande*? The answer emerges from an analysis of the special relationship that Debussy constructs between music and nature. On the one hand, Debussy tells us that "art is the most beautiful of lies"; accordingly, music never tells us any specific

articulated truth about nature. On the other hand, the dynamics of our perception of nature, in which we see through specific features, as poetry might articulate them, to an inexpressible totality, a "mouvement total de la nature," is the best analogue for the process of musical creation, which traverses sense toward an ideal unity beyond the articulation of meaning. Our duty, then, would be to look past the expression of the words associated with Debussy's music, not to find in the music an extension or repetition of the words' meaning, but to sense, between as well as beyond them, an echo of that ideal unity.

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DAYAN
Meaning in
Debussy's
Writing